THIS I BELIEVE
II Timothy 1:8-14
December 30, 1979

Arthur M. Romig
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Text: "For I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard, until that day, what has been entrusted to me."
II Timothy 1:12.

I heard a professor of homiletics once say, "Preach every sermon as though it were the last one you will ever preach." I am not sure that I can fully agree with him but this time I hardly need to pretend. This is my last sermon for this congregation, at least for a rather long period. I shall therefore be rather personal about what the Gospel means to me.

One of my heroes, whom I am also privileged to call a personal friend, is Dr. John A. Mackay, President Emeritus of Princeton Theological Seminary. He tells the story that, while traveling in South America, he stopped on the road to talk to a peasant who was hoeing his field. He asked the peasant a very simple question, but one difficult to answer: "What do you believe?" The answer came back, "I believe what the Church believes." Then Dr. Mackay asked, "And what does the Church believe?" The answer: "The Church believes what I believe."

From time to time I ask myself this same question, "What do I believe? And the second question, "What difference does it make?" It is at times such as this when I am starting a new venture, which usually means leaving an old one, that I most seriously ask these questions. So in the last few weeks I have been asking myself these questions again, as I seriously debate what I shall do during the next few years of my ministry. It is not easy to sever pleasant associations and the warm fellowship I have found here in Broad Street. There are driving forces, that we all have, as we make decisions. Allow me then, to share with you what I have felt to be my basic beliefs, not so much reasons for going to the Delaware Church, but as deep motivations that move me to face new opportunities and new challenges. In doing this I pray that it may lead you to search your own self for a statement of your beliefs that have driven you through the years.

I never cease to be amazed at the strong declarations of faith made by St. Paul. Have we not all been thrilled to hear him say to us as he said to the Roman church: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Or his words to the church in Philippi, "I count all things but loss for the excellancy of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"..."I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." As we have just read, now to his spiritual son, Timothy, Paul writes: "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure he is able to guard, until that day, what has been entrusted to me." So I try again to put into words the faith that God has entrusted to me, by which I must live. It is with hesitation that I do this, but I want to share what has evolved through all the struggles and the joys of these forty-eight years of ministry. Now bear with me as I share my faith.

I. I identify with Paul when he says, "<u>whom</u> I have believed" not <u>what</u> I have believed". I therefore start with what seems <u>fund</u>amental to me: a deep conviction that there is a loving, all-powerful Being whom I call God and from whom I cannot escape. I cannot escape Him as I look around the world, as I mow my grass or pick my flowers, as I look into the starry sky, as I feel the warmth of the sun or the chill of the wind. I feel His presence as I clasp the hand of a friend, or kiss the cheek of the one I love, or as I gaze into the eyes of a child who has just discovered he can walk, and reaches out to his mother with his first step.

Try as I might, like Francis Thompson in "The Hound of Heaven" or David in Psalm 139 which we read this morning, I cannot escape Him whether fleeing "down the labyrinthine ways" of life, or into the "uttermost parts of the sea" and land.

I cannot escape Him as I read the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as I see how men and women, through the ages, have felt His hand in their affairs and have found joy in obedience to His will.

I cannot escape this loving God as I search my own experience and relive those moments of danger or of great joy, when I reached out for help and found Him there to help me.

I cannot escape this sovereign controlling God as I study history and see the rise and fall of nations, and know the wonders of men and women as they seek to follow Him.

I cannot fully understand, but He satisfies my need for security, and I rest confident in Him. Yes, I build the rest of my faith on this foundation of a loving, good, and sovereign God whom I have come to call Father.

This God is not just a power, not just a watchmaker who put this world together, wound up the spring and let it run. The most important thing to me is that He is a Person and that He communicates with me. He lets me know about myself, and wants to know about me. Life for me, an animal with many animal instincts of self-preservation and propagation, takes on meaning when I know that He regards me as someone important enough to communicate and share His thoughts with and, I believe, with whom to share His very life.

Therefore I can know right from wrong, right being interpreted as being in accord with God's purpose and wrong being contrary to His purpose. Therefore I can believe in prayer as the means of communication, especially when quietness, meditation and listening are recognized as an essential part of prayer.

II. This fundamental belief leads me to faith in Jesus of Nazareth, whom I recognize as the Christ, God's anointed One and the One who has shown me what God is like. He has shown me the nature of God's love and judgment of His mercy and forgiveness. I would like to think that had I lived in Galilee 1950 years ago I would have had the wisdom and the courage to be counted among His followers. I am not sure that I would have been. Since I live in the twentieth century I want to be called a follower, one of Christ's men today.

I don't really understand how He saves me or anyone else. I heard Dr. Clifford Barbour, Moderator of the General Assembly some years ago, say that it didn't amaze him that he should believe in Christ, but it did amaze him that Christ should believe in him. Yes, that He should believe in me enough to trust me, forgive me, restore me and count me worthy of His love, that is the amazing thing. No, I don't understand the Cross, His death, His resurrection. I don't understand how He saves. I only know that He does, and that when I approach Him I find renewal, and strength for living, day after day.

I never experienced that great moment, some speak of, that can be recorded by day or hour or even minute in which some say they suddenly experienced Christ's saving power. But I have experienced His forgiveness again and again. I have experienced the renewal of spirit time and time again. I have felt accepted by God not once, but constantly. I have felt the wholeness of life as I live it day after day and can speak to Him as I walk the streets of Columbus, or New York, Oakland or Shanghai. And, if to you salvation means a future bliss you call "heaven" that is fine. I am also

confident of a future in which this loving Father will care for me in ways far beyond that of which I cannot imagine, call it what you will. I believe it will be better than gold streets or gates of pearl. I would rather like something greener, quieter, with less glitter, and more music to accompany the harps.

It is this man of Nazareth who shows me what a true man, created in God's image, is like. He not only reveals to me the nature of the loving Father but He also reveals to me what a man created in God's image can and ought to be, and that potential I would like to achieve by God's grace.

III. I am now sure that you expect me, as a third item in my creed, to believe in the Holy Spirit. You shall not be disappointed, for I do believe in the Holy Spirit as God, living and vibrant in the world today. This is the way I know God, through the Spirit as He directs my conscience, as He continues His creation by transforming men and women, re-creating them into His image again. He is God in the present tense. As sensitive as a breath of air, as penetrating as a ray of light, as strong as the lightning and as quick, as gentle as a snow flake. He can shake mankind as an earthquake, and He can lift a person's spirit as a whisper of love. This is the Spirit to me as He blows through the earth, bringing fresh life to all who will open the windows of their souls to Him. God is alive and I cannot set the bounds of His work or the pattern by which He deals with you and me today.

It is this God, whom I recognize as the Holy Spirit who allows the Bible to speak to me, the same God that created the world and the one that saves mankind. Yes, I believe the Bible is a means through which God speaks to me and to you, as the Spirit takes these black letters on a white page and speaks to my mind and heart through them. For it is the Bible record that tells me of Jesus and of how God deals with people through the ages, and will continue to deal with people in the ages to come.

But I must hurry on, lest I lull you to sleep rather than awaken in you faith.

IV. The next pillar on which I build my faith is the Church of Jesus Christ. This is the organism, ever throbbing with life that the Apostle Paul calls the Body of Christ. Not an organization, not an immovable structure, even though many have made it seem so; not a self-seeking elite power, though many have used it for their own selfish purposes; but a living, breathing, sensitive organism that responds to the heartbeat of God, and is directed by the mind of the Creator. It is not limited to Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, or Roman Catholics, or Greek Orthodox, or even Southern Baptists or any other organized structure that men and women have set up by which to govern themselves as Christians. I believe in the historical church because I believe God has worked in every age and generation, so that Peter was part of the fellowship, as was Abraham and Moses, or Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham. I trust the experience of the Apostle John, of Francis of Assisi, of Augustine or Ignatius Loyola, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of John Calvin and John Wesley. My experience may not be the same as theirs, but I am part of that great fellowship, just as the arm is part of the body, as much as is the heart.

And so I accept the tradition of the Church as valid and part of the authority of my creed. If God is alive, as I believe He is, He has continued to work, leading people to fulfill His purposes throughout all history. It is the Church, and the Church alone, that has consciously dedicated itself as the witness to God and salvation through Jesus Christ, through all the ages.

V. Let us hurry on for there is much more to say. Because I have this kind of faith, the Apostle Paul sould say, "Therefore, a kind of living must take place." As I understand the Christian faith, it is like love. It is only an undiscovered gold mine until it is opened up, and the treasure is found and shared with others who need it.

As love must be shared to be love, so Christian faith must be shared if it is truly Christian faith. But this sharing of the faith is not just in words. In fact, words often become the hindrance to belief. It is in doing the faith that faith is made clear and shared. Our faith is most truly expressed in acts of love for one another, certainly not in the desire to save my skin and receive the rewards of heaven, or even secure another star in a crown of glory. If another is led to find fulfillment of his life and to worship the Christ because of my life, it cannot be regarded as just another scalp to nail to my record of achievement. So I can no longer sing "That will be glory for me" or ask the question "Will there be any stars in my crown?" as those old gospel songs had us sing.

My faith requires of me that I share the fortunes of my life, the gifts of God, with others, because they too are children of the heavenly Father and we are one family with the Father. I must be ready to receive your gift to me, just as I must share my gift with you. I think God purposely made us each different from the other, so that we may be individuals enriching one another. But I also believe that He wants each of us, throughout the entire world, to find the wholeness of human life and the deep satisfaction of life lived according to God's image as He re-creates us, and that this is found only when we accept one another and the gifts each has to give. It is up to me then to do what I can to see that others know this fulfillment. Perhaps that is why I have always felt the impulse to be on a mission. In our day I am convinced this mission means feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing the slaves whatever their bondage, working for justice and peace for all people everywhere, and let all people know the wonderful joy and peace, and freedom that comes from being bound to the loving Father. Such bondage to the Father brings the freedom to stand alone, if necessary, in a world that lives only for itself.

VI. Lastly, at least for this occasion, I believe I am free and therefore responsible free to be faithful or to be unfaithful. I can choose either to run my life selfishly and make all things center around me and my earthly comforts and desires, which seems to result in boredom, frustration and futility if I read history clearly; or I can say God alone is Lord and Him will I obey. You and I did say just that at some time when we pledged our allegiance to Christ, as we joined the Church. And as I read biography, and study the lives of men and women, it is these latter ones, those that have made God their Lord, that I want to be like.

I believe that the ultimate satisfaction is found in being faithful to that Lord and not merely in being successful. "Success", even for the Christian, is only what I or the people around me think to be most satisfactory to them, whereas faithfulness is being sensitive, not to what others think you ought to be or what they would like to be, but what I know deep in my heart is obedience to the vision of my life that God has given me. For me it means, living out those things of my faith of which I speak, though it be poorly said, so that the principles I preach be lived out in life. This may result in being thought most unsuccessful by the general public. Some have even lost their lives because of it, as did the Lord I seek to follow. Such faithfulness will mean different things at different times. For the prophet Amos in the 8th century B.C. it was to speak of God's displeasure at the oppression of the poor and the lack of justice in the nation. For John Wycliffe in the 14th century after Christ it was to translate the Bible into English even if it meant excommunication and death. For Wendell Phillips in the 19th century it was to use his oratorical powers and join forces with those who worked for the abolition of slavery in this land. For Carrie Nation it was to use the hatchet and attack the problem of alcohol. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer it meant an obedience to death as he strove for freedom in the face of Nazi fascism. For Martin Luther King, Jr. it meant the struggle for equality of opportunity for races and the elimination of racism everywhere.

For me, living in the latter years of the 20th century, what does obedience mean? Soren Kierkegaard once said, "It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey." And obedience is the key. Do you recall the words of Jesus, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" and the command was to love one another as He loved us. But my obedience is not necessarily yours, but obedience for me, as yours must become for you, means heaven rather than hell, happiness rather than despair.

We could follow through the implications of such responsibility along many lines: my personal behavior and life style; my use of energy in this day of shortages; my relationships with others, my family, my friends, and my "enemies", all must be logically lined up with the faith I express. Let us then take just one pressing problem of this 20th century about which I must follow the command to love.

I must without question in this 20th century do what I can to eliminate racism, to establish peace throughout the world. This will mean opposition to such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazi Party, and the John Birch Society. It means to me opposing extreme nationalism wherever it is found whether in Iran, Ireland, Israel or here in America; and it means standing with the forces for peace wherever they are found. It means to me understanding and loving those holding views different from mine, though disliking their views. It means a thousand little things in relation to other persons as we live day by day.

I would like to have written the poem written by Studdert Kennedy, entitled 'Faith" which he says is "Betting your life on God". He closes that poem with these words: "Such is my faith and such my reasons for it, and I find them strong enough. And you? You want to argue? Well, I can't. It is a choice. I choose the Christ."

Now let me thank you for the opportunity through these years of sharing my faith and life with you at Broad Street. You have also shared yours with me, for which I am both grateful and the richer. We all believe something. It is that by which we live. You may express it in a way that I cannot - in music, or painting, or dance or poetry or just in your daily living. You have shared your feeling for fellowship with me and with one another and I have been blessed. Thank you.